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MISS FINE'S SCHOOL

May 23, 1951

lecture by

George F. Kennan

Miss Davis and members of Miss Fine's School:

I understand this is your last assembly of the year. It comes at a time when there is lots of talk and argument about Foreign Policy. Most of that talk and the argument centers on things that the Russian Communists have done or things that their friends have done and what we Americans ought to do about it, in return. People say: the Russians -- this; and the Russians -- that; and are the Russians going to make war on us? Or -- do you think we ought to make war against the Russians? And for this reason I thought it might be a good thing for us this morning to have a closer look at what it is we mean by "the Russians" when we say "the Russians did this and the Russians did that."

Do we mean the Russian people and all the other peoples that live in the Soviet Union? I think the answer is clearly no. We don't mean the Russian people themselves. They have much less to do with running the affairs of their government than we in this country have to do with the running of ours -- in fact, most of them have practically nothing to do with it at all. Most of them don't even know much of what is going on. And it is hard for them to find out. They have newspapers and radio broadcasts, but these are all run by the Government and tell them only what the Government wants them to know. Most of the Russians are just plain people who do their work because they have to eat and live, who try to keep out of trouble, and who hope, just as people do in this country, that there will not be another terrible war and that some day the governments can arrange things so that everybody won't be so nervous and afraid.

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What we're talking about then are not the many many millions of people who just live and work in the Soviet Union, but the very few people who run things in that country and who make all the decisions. It's hard to find a good name for these people. They are the top Communist officials. Common people in Russia sometimes call them "the bosses," but more often they just speak of them as "they." People say "they" did this or that, "they" are going to raise the prices, "they" arrested so-and-so and sent him to Siberia. People don't say who: it's just "they."

What does "they" mean? It doesn't mean just the Soviet Government, because the men I am talking about are really the leaders of the Communist Party in Russia; some of them are in the Government and some aren't; but they decide what the Government shall do, and the Government does what they decide. Sometimes people in our country refer to them as the "Kremlin." That is because they live and work in a little walled city right in the midst of Moscow where nobody else is allowed to enter, so that nobody can talk to them or see what they are doing unless they want him to, and this walled city is called the Kremlin. They keep so much apart that sometimes people do not even know anything about their personal lives -- do not even know whether they are married and have families. And yet they are tremendously important people, and everyone knows their names and knows that they are the important people.

Let's ask ourselves, then, what sort of people these are who run Russia and cause so much trouble for everyone in this world, and where they came from, and how they got that way.

To answer this question you have to go far back in Russian history -- back to the time of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. At that time Russia was still ruled by a single man called the Tsar or the Emperor. He had a government, of course, to help him, but he was what we call an "autocrat," that is, whatever he said was law, and he could have people put to death, if he wanted, or treated pretty much in any way he wanted to have them treated.

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Now some of you may have read about how Napoleon invaded Russia with an army of some six hundred thousand men in the summer of 1812 and marched all the way into the heart of Russia and took Moscow; but how he never could destroy the Russian army and no one would surrender to him, and somebody put the city on fire and all the people just ran away, and left him and his troops almost alone in the burning city; and finally winter came upon him and there was not enough food for his army, and they had to try to retreat again, hundreds and hundreds of miles, back to western Europe; and how they froze to death and starved to death by the tens of thousands, until finally when they got to the borders of Russia again they were only a pitiful little handful of men, ragged and disordered, instead of the great splendid army they had marched in. That was the beginning of the end for Napoleon, and two or three years later he was completely defeated and all his enemies closed in on France. It was at that time that some of the Russian troops, fighting against Napoleon, came all the way to Paris, and took part in the occupation of that city. In this way many of the young Russian officers saw what life was like in western Europe and how much freer and more attractive it was than life in Russia. And when they got back home they started secret societies with a view to changing the system in Russia and having a constitution and civil liberties such as the European countries had. That was the real beginning of what was called the revolutionary movement in Russia; and for a hundred years after that time there was always in Russia a revolutionary opposition -- that is, people who are trying to get greater freedom and a different government system.

People could not do this openly. It was regarded as a very bad thing to try to change the system in Russia, and if you got caught at it you could be sent away in chains to exile or forced labor in Siberia, which was a very terrible experience, or you could be killed if what you did was bad enough. The great Russian writer, Dostoevsky, whose novels you may someday enjoy reading, got mixed up in one of these secret societies among the university students, when he was a young man. He got caught by the Government and was condemned to death and taken out and forced to stand on the scaffold, with the death cap on his head, to be hanged, and only then did

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they tell him that they would not kill him, but they did send him to Siberia with the others for years of forced labor. So you can see that to be an oppositionist in Russia in those days was no joke, and you really had to believe seriously in what you were doing.

As the years of the nineteenth century went on, the kind of people who became revolutionists in Russia gradually changed. First it was some of the officers and people in high society. Then it was rather the students and the professors and liberary people of all sorts. Later, in the 1880's, it was mostly idealistic young people from the educated classes who believed that the peasant -- the poor farmer, that is -- should be the basis of a new governmental system in Russia. Some of these people went out in the country villages and tried to get to know the farmers and do things for them as teachers or doctors. But others of them, trying to get rid of the Government, carried out assassinations of members of the royal family and various government leaders who they thought were particularly bad and oppressive. Those who went in for assassination had to hide most of the time from the police, and when they got caught assassinating anyone, or trying to assassinate him, they were generally executed quite promptly. They naturally had to be very brave people, and to believe deeply in what they were doing, to live such a life.

Along toward the end of the last century things changed in Russia in this way: whereas up to that time eighty per cent of the people in Russia had been farmers, and there had been practically no industry, now Russia began to be industrialized, big factories began to spring up around the larger cities, and a new class of people was coming into existence, namely the people who worked in these factories -- most of them peasants who had left their farms because there was not enough land for them to make a living on and because they heard about these opportunities for work in these factories. When they began to work in the factories, these people were very poorly payed and treated: they had to work long hours, they had no decent places to live, no

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proper vacations or medical services. Things had been the same way in the western countries -- in England and France, that is, and even in our own country, in the early days of factories; but Russia got its factories much later than the western countries, and by that time things in England and Germany and other countries had gotten better.

But meanwhile, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a man in Germany named Karl Marx had written a book; and this book, despite the fact that it was very long and hard to read, made a deep impression on many people. In this book Karl Marx said that it was all wrong for individual people to own such things as factories and to make other people work for them in those factories; he said that the profits of factories ought to go to the people who worked in them and not the people who owned them; he thought the Government ought to own all factories and all complicated machines for doing things and producing things. But this wasn't all. He went further than this and said that the only people who really ought to have anything to do with government should be the workers. People who owned businesses of any sort seemed to him to be people who ought not to be permitted to have anything to do with government, because -- he said -- they would always decide things in the way they thought would bring them more money and not in the way that was best for the people in general. And this whole system of having businesses owned by private people, the way we do in this country, he called "capitalism"; and he claimed that not only was it a bad system which ought not to last but that it was such a bad system that it could not last very long, and that it would some day break down because the rich people would get richer and the poor people would get poorer, and that there would be fewer rich people, and more poor people, until the thing just couldn't go on any more, and the poor people couldn't stand it any more, and then the poor people would seize the factories for themselves and take over and run things. And after a while, he said, there wouldn't be any need for any government at all, because the workers would own their own factories and would all be happy and there wouldn't be any reason for them to behave badly or to be selfish and criminal; and besides --

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government in the past had only been a means by which rich people contrived to hang on to their riches, and when there weren't any rich people any more, you wouldn't need government. So, he thought, government ought to be overthrown in capitalist countries and the power seized by the workers. In other words, he thought there should be revolutions against the governments in the capitalist countries.

Now we know today that a great deal of what Karl Marx wrote was wrong. He just didn't have things figured out right. We can see from our own experience in this country that when you have for a long time a capitalist system as Marx called it (we usually call it a free enterprise system), the poor people don't get poorer and more numerous and the rich people richer and fewer, but rather just the opposite. And we can see that Marx forgot all about the importance of management in business -- about the importance of what the owners did for their own businesses. Marx failed to foresee that the world wouldn't be made up in the future just of factory workers and owners but that there would be growing numbers of people -- white collar workers, managers, professors, farmers, lawyers, etc. -- who would be neither factory owners nor workers in factories and who therefore wouldn't fit into his system at all. And finally, Marx failed to realize that people were not necessarily bad people just because they owned factories and good people just because they worked in them, and that it was unjust and foolish to try to divide people in this way and to say that some ought to have all the power and others oughtn't to exist at all.

As I say, we can see these things today, but many of the Russian oppositionists could not see them fifty years ago. And there was another reason why they were taken with these Marxist ideas. I suspect that most of them were people who felt a little sorry for themselves. They just naturally liked to be "agin" things because it was easier to be "agin" them than for them -- and it made them feel more important. But around the beginning of this century they began to need some sort of new theory or explanation for their being oppositionists and being agin everything, because the Tsar's Government was becoming steadily better and less terrible to live under;

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so they leaped at Marx's theory and said to themselves: "This is it, this explains why we ought to overthrow the Tsar's Government, because it is a wicked capitalist government; and this tells us what sort of a system we ought to have instead of it." So they became Marxists, and they founded what was called the Social Democratic party, and they went right ahead with their efforts to bring about a revolution and to change the system.

Now this fact that they became Marxists was one of the important things about these people. But there was something else which I think even more important: All through the history of this revolutionary movement there was an argument among the revolutionists about <u>how</u> you ought to do things. And they divided, generally, into two groups. One group said that if it was the right thing to overthrow the Tsar's Government -- if this was the right thing to do -- then it didn't matter how you did it: you could be as cruel as you wanted, you could lie to people, you could kill people, you could even kill innocent people, if it would help to overthrow the Government. Because, these people said, if your goal is right, if what you are trying to accomplish is right, then anything you do to achieve that goal must be right, too.

The other group said: no, that is not correct. If we begin to lie to people and to be cruel to people, and to kill them unjustly, then we will be no better than the Government, and then what right have we got to overthrow it. We should abide, these people said, by Christian principles and only do things that we think are good, because you can't reach a good goal by bad means.

It is important for us to remember that from 1900 on the man that was the strongest and most important man among the revolutionists, Vladimir Lenin, was one of those who believed, as people say, that the end justified the means, and that you could be as cruel or as deceitful as you wanted if it would help to bring about the revolution. Lenin was a very hard and strong man. His younger brother, Alexander, had been one of those young idealists who had tried to assassinate leading people in the Government, and he had been caught and

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put to death for it when he was only 17 years old. Lenin had loved him very much, and I suppose this helped to make him hard and bitter. Perhaps he wasn't so cruel by nature, but he just felt that you could not be a good revolutionist if you let your feelings interfere. He once said to one of his friends:

> "I can't listen to music too often. It affects your nerves, and makes you want to say stupid, nice things and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile world. But you mustn't stroke anyone's head -- you might get your hand bitten off."

That is the kind of man Lenin was; and he was the man who came to be the head of one group of revolutionists who were known as the Volshevists. And they were very strong and determined men indeed, who believed in rigid discipline and believed that you should sacrifice your personal life completely to the cause.

Now these people kept on trying to overthrow the Tsar's Government, but they didn't have much success. The police were so strict that to run their movement the leaders usually had to live abroad, and their followers in Russia had to be a secret society. And they never did succeed in starting the revolution themselves. Actually, the Tsar's Government got more and more liberal, and there came to be less and less need for a revolution. But as it became more liberal, the Tsar's Government unfortunately did not become any more efficient, and during the first World War -- in 1916 and 1917 -- it bungled things so badly that it couldn't even feed the people in the big cities properly, and things got to be a terrible mess generally in Russia, and finally, in February 1917, the Government sort of collapsed of its own weight, and its place was taken by a liberal democratic government which wanted to have a political system somewhat like our own.

Lenin was amazed when all this happened, because he had had nothing to do with the whole business. He was living in Switzerland, in exile, and when he read

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in the paper that a revolution had occurred in Russia, he was fit to be tied. You can imagine how surprised he was. He had given most of his life trying to bring about a revolution, and suddenly it happened all by itself. He got back to Russia just as fast as he could. But instead of being glad that a democratic government had come into power and that he was free to live in Russia again and to say everything he pleased and to compete freely in Russian political life and try to get himself elected by a majority of the voters, he set out at once to oppose the new government just the way he had opposed the government of the Tsar and to try to seize the power for himself and his supporters. He was very well prepared to do this, because he had been thinking about it and planning for it for many years, whereas the democratic leaders were quite surprised to find themselves suddenly in power and quite unprepared for the experience, and had no very clear idea of what they wanted to do or how to go about things. And everything was hard for them, because the country was in the middle of a war, and everybody was fed up and restless and a lot of people did not want to wait for a real democratic system to be worked out. The result was that within a few months Lenin and his followers, although they were only a tiny minority of the people, were able to get a lot of the soldiers and sailors on their side, and then suddenly to arrest the democratic leaders, seize the government, and take all the power to themselves. This happened in the fall of 1917, and it was the beginning of what people call the Soviet regime.

In the years that followed, there was at first plenty of trouble. A lot of people didn't want the Bolsheviks in power; there was a long and terrible civil war between those that did and those that didn't. Then there was trouble with the farmers, and there was a famine, and hundreds of thousands of people died of hunger. And relations with other countries were very bad, because the Bolsheviks maintained that not only was it right that there should be such a revolution in Russia but that really there ought to be a similar revolution in every other country, and they set up communist parties in the other countries whose task it was to try to see that such revolutions were brought about in those countries, too; and believing these things, and also

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believing that it didn't matter how many lies you told if what you were doing was right, they also put out a great deal of propaganda against the other governments and said the nastiest things they could think to say about them, whether they were true or not. This did not make other people like them any better, and I think it is not surprising that they have never had very pleasant relations with any other government.

Many people hoped that as time went on, after the Revolution, things would settle down again in Russia, and the regime would become less cruel. But it didn't work out that way. In the 1930's, there was another great wave of terror and cruelty. It was this that people call "the purges." Just why it all happened, we don't really know. But it meant the outright killing of thousands of people -- many of them who were themselves Communists, and the sending off of hundreds of thousands and millions of others to terrible work camps in Siberia or in the other Arctic regions of the Soviet Union, for long periods of forced labor which many of them never survived at all. And this shows you, I think, what people come to when they say that it doesn't matter how you act if what you are trying to do is right. In the end, you don't trust anybody, and you have to be just as cruel to your own friends and associates as to your enemies.

But, of course, these communists were not the only people who were killed or punished by the Soviet regime. Millions of other Russian people who were not communists at all were also killed or sent to concentration camps at one time or another, either because they had done something which looked like opposition to the leading group, or, more often, just because the Kremlin leaders thought that they were people who might be apt to do something of this sort, or that it would be a good plan to arrest them and send them away anyway, as a warning and a lesson to the rest of the people to be good and to obey faithfully.

Now the worst thing about this sort of government is that the crueler you have been, the crueler you have to be; because soon you have to fear not only the people who have been against you since the beginning, but all

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the people you have punished or offended in one way or another, and all of their friends and relatives besides. And the result is that the rulers of the Soviet Union have worked themselves into a position where they simply do not dare not to rule by very terrible and cruel means. But they hate to admit this, and like many people who have gotten themselves into an unhappy position they do not blame themselves for it, but they have a tendency to blame other people for it. For this reason, they hate the countries where there is still some freedom and happiness and a higher degree of prosperity. They feel that such countries provide a standard of comparison which makes people in Russia more discontented with things there than they would otherwise be. They think that if there were not this freedom in other countries the people in Russia would not know how unjustly they were being treated, would not yearn to live a free life, would not even know that there was such a thing as freedom.

For this reason, the Soviet leaders have a real resentment of the outside world, and it is for this reason that they impose on their own people what we call the "iron curtain," that is, a set of rules to keep them from learning what life in the outside world is like and to keep the outside world from knowing what life in Soviet Russia is like.

This is why it is so hard for any of us to get along with the Soviet Communists. They are too much afriad to be good friends with anybody; and the hard part of it is that it's not just us they are afraid of -- most of all, they are afraid of themselves and the situation that they have created in Russia and the fact that they do not dare now to make their country as free and happy as countries elsewhere in the world.

Now many people, seeing these things and thinking about them, say that we ought to make war in order to free the Russian people from this regime. But, personally, I don't think that is the right answer. Perhaps the Communist leaders will themselves someday get so afraid that they will get desperate and will start a war themselves, and then, of course, we would have to fight.

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But I doubt that that will happen; and if it does not happen, I do not think we should start a war ourselves. A war might do greater damage to the Russian people than to the Communist regime, and it would be especially that way if we were to start the war ourselves, because then the Communists would say to the people: You see, we always told you that these Americans were wicked people and enemies of Russia, and now they are attacking you, and bombing your cities, and killing your children just out of sheer meanness; and you had better stick with us, the Communists, because you can see now that the capitalist world is even worse than we are.

And so I think we have no choice but to do what we are doing today in Korea and other places; that is, to try to keep the Soviet Communists from spreading their power over new areas of the world, but not to go in ourselves and try to settle all the questions of the future by another great war. Because I think great wars make more problems than they solve, as a rule; and while sometimes you have to fight them (sometimes other people have you no choice) still it's better if you don't have to, and you should do all you can to keep out of them. And I think the Russian people are a great people, and, like any other great people, have many fine and wonderful people among them.

And so I think that what we ought to do is to go our way, and be firm and well-prepared and not give the communists anything for nothing, but still be patient and not try to solve everything all at once. And I am pretty sure that if we do that, somehow or other things will work themselves out, even in Russia; and the Russian people will be thankful to us that we didn't make war against them but let them work things out in their own way.

That's what I think. But a lot of people don't agree with me. Someday you ought to hear what they say, too.

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